



Between Tyranny and Complicity: Thoughts on Responding to Oppressive Student Conduct

By Greg Shupak

Critical pedagogy scholars have long struggled to reconcile their desire for a democratic, participatory classroom with the necessity of creating a learning environment that is safe and inclusive. Indeed, in critical pedagogy theory there is a tension between enabling students to think for themselves and convincing students to read the cultural and political world in the same way as their professor. How, then, should a postsecondary educator respond to students whose classroom behavior is sexist, racist, homophobic, displays class prejudice, or is otherwise oppressive toward other students? Can we develop pedagogical practices in which the role of the teacher is neither to be an authoritarian preacher nor someone who, through their silence, sanctions students' words or deeds that undermine their peers' human rights?

Allow me to provide some context. I have taught college classes designed to foster critical thinking as well as writing skills. One exercise involves students reading and analyzing argumentative articles principally from mainstream newspapers or magazines. Students participate in class discussions about the readings where they are asked to explain which aspects of the articles they have found convincing or unconvincing and why. The opinion pieces being discussed address, to give only two examples, such potentially fraught matters as religious beliefs or the overrepresentation of people of colour in prisons. It is easy to see how discussions about such subjects can lead to one student expressing opinions that others find threatening to their very identity. Even discussing something with a less obviously explosive potential can lead to students making statements that may be oppressive to others. Here I am thinking, for example, of a discussion my class had about the value of post-secondary education to society at large in which one student made a comment to the effect that they thought it made sense to increase subsidies for such schooling because "it's better than giving that money to lazy people on welfare."

I imagine most post-secondary Humanities educators have been in similar situations. In my estimation, such scenarios are characterized by the following dilemma: you want to prevent students from experiencing oppression at the hands of classmates and yet you do not wish to make it part of your pedagogical practice to police your students' worldviews. With regard to situations like the ones I have been describing, I ask: is it responsible when, so as to avoid imposing their views on students, a professor insufficiently counteracts the sexism, heteronormativity, racism, or class prejudice that many students will bring to a course? How, as Ajay Heble asks (2002), do "we negotiate between, on the one hand, a genuine insistence on and valuing of student expression (itself an ethical move?) and, on the other, our ethical responsibility to promote forms of inquiry and models of knowledge-production which challenge oppression, suffering and

injustice?" (p. 147). These are the central questions that this paper explores.

To respond to them, I address what I see as two of the underlying issues that I think are at play here. First, I consider whether teachers should make their specific political opinions known to students and whether professors should take sides during in-class debates among students. Again, my specific focus is on cases where one student or group of them is behaving oppressively toward one or more other students. My argument is that sometimes it is necessary for a college teacher to express political opinions that differ from those held by one or more of their students and that it is misguided to think that value-free teaching is even possible. I call this interventionist pedagogy. Having staked out those positions, the second underlying issue I address here is how teachers can make these interventions responsibly so that the classroom does not become, in effect, a re-education camp.

Before that, I want to acknowledge that the case against teachers explicitly stating their political views in class and trying to convince students to share them is not without merit. Allow me to provide a brief overview of this argument, which I call anti-interventionist pedagogy. One concern is that what in other settings may be a mere expression of personal beliefs can in the context of a college classroom easily become conflated with a set of unquestionable dogmatic truths and by virtue of that there is a risk of a closing off of alternative perspectives. Another anti-interventionist argument is that the mere fact that professors claim to be putting forth views to help usher in a better world is no guarantee that their notions of how the world ought to be is necessarily desirable. A third argument against teachers explicitly advocating particular socio-political views is that students must be at the centre of learning and that the professor should help direct this process without making intrusions. Professors who do make such incursions, this line of argumentation goes, tend to behave in an authoritarian manner by using their position of power to impose their views onto students. In my estimation, these are all important concerns with which interventionists must honestly reckon and so I will now attempt to do so.¹

I will begin my critique of the anti-interventionists by responding to some of their arguments. While it is certainly true that what a professor says in class carries considerable authority, it does not follow that a teacher who takes a stance on a political issue necessarily exercises undue coercion in the process. Too frequently the question of whether professors should intervene in classroom debates or make known their own political positions is framed as though the mere act of expressing a view is tantamount to, for example, giving students low grades should they not conform to every letter of a particular political platform.

Furthermore, a teacher who in an effort to establish classroom democracy opts against taking sides in a debate infantilizes their students and in this way undermines the very egalitarianism they aim to create. Rather than assuming that students' intellects and convictions are too fragile to withstand a professor who openly disagrees with them, a professor should be as forthright about his or her views with students as he or she would be with a colleague. Furthermore, a professor opposed to

taking sides in debates being taught, or in disagreements between students in the classroom, risks suggesting to students that, for example, anti-racism is not necessarily superior to racism, or that gender equality is not intrinsically better than its opposite.

Consider Heble's comments on one of his teaching experiences. In reflecting on an especially contentious class he taught wherein a group of white males behaved in an overtly sexist and racist fashion, Heble (2002) asks:

Is it possible . . . not to take sides when students are literally yelling at one another across the floor in the classroom?... [P]retending to remain neutral in the midst of fractious classroom debates just doesn't seem a viable option.... Not only did the polarized settings force many of us (myself included) to make judgments and announce commitments, but, perhaps more importantly, they taught me that students and teachers alike need to work on sharpening and invigorating our understanding of the way in which our judgments and commitments are grounded in complex patterns of social and historical relevance (p. 151).

In situations such as the one that Heble describes, maintaining neutrality during class discussions on the grounds that doing so is a necessary part of an ethical pedagogy seems to me to be a logical contradiction. When one group of students asserts the validity of oppressive discourses, and enacts them in the process, it is untenable for a critical pedagogue to say that they do not want to take a position because doing so would be undemocratic. I say that because in this case anti-interventionism allows one group of students to dominate another thereby denying them a democratic learning environment. Teachers will from time to time face moments where students' rights to express themselves freely irreconcilably conflicts with other students' rights to not be oppressed and I argue that it is irresponsible for teachers not to use their power to intervene on behalf of the group being discriminated against.

Furthermore, as Patricia Bizzell (1992) writes, "everything I do in the classroom is informed by one or another element of my world view, thus potentially conflicting at every turn with other elements in the students' diverse world views and, because of my institutional position at the head of the class, potentially undercutting their values" (p. 284). Bizzell's point is that the anti-interventionist approach to classroom debate is flawed in its belief that discourse can take place in a neutral space unmarked by power and material inequities. Underlying the claim that teachers should not make explicit their political views in class is the untenable assumption that some forms of knowledge and opinion are politicized and therefore biased as compared to those that are allegedly neutral or natural or value-free. I am not persuaded that the latter category can even exist, at least or especially in the Humanities, and this is another reason that I think the anti-interventionist view can be rejected.

Now that I have made my critique of the anti-interventionists, I will turn my attention to the question of how one can intervene responsibly. How can a professor take sides in the classroom on politically fraught matters in a way that it is democratic rather than a tyrannical? What are some ways to

call into question the ethical positions students take without shaming, punishing or banishing them?

Bizzell (1992) offers some insight into these concerns. She writes that, when necessary, she will openly state her positions and acknowledge that they are “constructed by [her] social, cultural, and historical circumstances, and, in effect, warn students in advance that if they come to [her], this is what they will be getting. Thus at least [she] cannot be accused of imposing so-called ‘political correctness’ on hapless students or of duping them into exposing themselves unawares to [her] persuasive approaches” (p. 288). This strategy is worth considering for several reasons. In the first place, the qualifications that Bizzell suggests have the capacity to take the blunt edge off a professor’s expression of beliefs about social and political issues. Moreover, when a professor clearly articulates her political values and undertakes the work of attempting to change antagonistic minds, she is providing an illustration of precisely the sort of critical engagement that Humanities teachers typically want to encourage in their students. Having a professor forthrightly argue for their beliefs in class and yet acknowledge the constructedness and contingency of those beliefs is a way of embodying the spirit of openness and democratic inquiry that is required for learning in Humanities courses.

Among the reasons that pedagogical efforts to change students’ minds are sometimes understood as brainwashing is the perception that teachers attempt to do this by a sleight of hand in which their analyses are passed off as universal, scientific truths. Bizzell’s method allows her to address that very legitimate concern. By pointing out that her opinions are, like anyone else’s, shaped by the circumstances in which she lives and not transcendental, she also reduces the potentially tyrannical force of her statements. Expressing her views with these qualifications demonstrates to students that opinions offered by the professor are neither intrinsically superior nor inferior to differing views that students hold. Yet Bizzell also stops short of claiming that, because her beliefs are subjective, they can inherently never be no more true, valid or desirable than anyone else’s. What she does here is create what I call a space of democratic convictions. I use that term to denote a discursive and physical sphere in which she can articulate her political opinions without making grander claims for them than she can defend with material evidence, logic and ethics. Yet, at the same time, the space of democratic convictions enables Bizzell to avoid capitulating to the idea that her own opinions have no more merit than, say, those of a Holocaust denier or a supporter of the Ku Klux Klan.

Another reflection of Bizzell’s provides insight into how professors can use rhetoric in a self-conscious way to make explicit their political views without imposing them in a dictatorial manner. She writes:

I want to encourage my students to imitate my exercise of rhetorical authority. I have to allow them to try to persuade me . . . and to persuade other members of the class....I have to devise pedagogical mechanisms whereby everyone’s access to rhetorical authority could be realized in our work together, for example, through finding ways for students to . . . take [course] lessons out into non-academic contexts (p. 293).

These remarks demonstrate that questions of whether, when, and how professors should make clear that their political views cannot be divorced from other pedagogical questions, particularly those pertaining to the methods by which knowledge is exchanged and produced in the classroom. The surest way a teacher can guard against lapsing into authoritarianism while taking socio-political positions is by doing so in the context of a classroom that is characterized by dialogue and by a collective learning process.

What I take from Bizzell's comments is that the very structure of a class based on principles of participatory, active, communal, critical education will by virtue of this form mitigate the risk of having a classroom resemble a re-education camp. If the dynamics of a class are such that students' ideas are demonstrably valued, then statements of value that a professor makes lack much of the coercive character present when teachers do the same in the context of a classroom where education is delivered principally by the banking model of education (Friere 1970), an approach to education wherein an educator lectures at students who are expected to passively absorb what they are being told. By contrast, a pedagogy fundamentally rooted in student-teacher dialogue has something of a built-in safety mechanism that guards against the problem of the teacher-as-dictator dynamic in that a participatory class structure creates the maximum possible likelihood that professors will be challenged by dissenting students and thus any form of tyrannical brainwashing will be undermined.

Indoctrination is therefore a considerably more serious problem in classrooms that employ the banking model of education. I say this because in that setting a professor's value statements are subject to an insufficient degree of open interrogation because these opinions function as uncontestable truths deposited into students. Far from stifling opposition, when a professor in a class that is dialogic takes explicit political positions, the effect can be to increase debate and dialogue. In this way the very practice that is sometimes identified as authoritarian by critical pedagogy theorists can actually sharpen students' critical thinking and, when the classroom is one that encourages student dissent, invite challenges to the professor.

Bizzell's emphasis on rhetorical authority is worth underscoring. One way for a teacher to take clear political positions and attempt to convince students to agree with them without turning the classroom into a re-education camp is for that teacher to come right out and say that, "When I offer you my opinions on a given subject, pay attention to not just what I think but how I express my thoughts." When a professor presents and defends their views, this can be useful to students in terms of offering students a rhetorical model that they can employ when engaging in intellectual activities of their own. In this way, in the act of presenting views—even those that are a complete anathema to students—a teacher is providing them with a tool useful in their critical development. This strategy limits the degree to which a professor can be understood to be brainwashing when she or he tries to change students' minds in that the students are also learning rhetorical skills in the process.

Diana Brydon offers another potentially concrete way to handle these dilemmas in her account of how to respond to and make use of the

ignorance that some students will bring to the classroom. In this context “ignorance” refers not to the absence of knowledge about an academic subject, but to social, political, and cultural beliefs that rest on oppressive stereotypes. Brydon (2004) writes that “[w]e need to find ways of eliciting and sharing ignorance that remedy that failing without stigmatizing the person [who holds such views]....We need to be able to turn [demonstrations of ignorance] toward [an] examination of how ignorance is itself actively produced and how certain forms of ignorance actually receive social sanction” (p. 67). Though I have argued that it is unethical for a teacher to sanction through their silence a student offering oppressive viewpoints, attacking the relevant student is at least as likely to cause them to feel like a victim of professorial tyranny and to retreat into a hardening of their positions as it is to cause them to change their views. Embracing the value of ignorance is an approach that professors can take to the oppressive opinions that students will sometimes bring to a class that enables the teacher to challenge these perspectives without doing so in an autocratic way designed to chastise or otherwise humiliate the student in question. This strategy can be pursued by as gently as is reasonably possible pointing out some of the flaws in such a student’s comments and quickly shifting attention to the origin of the misinformation underlying these statements. Conversations can in this way be shifted from the shortcomings in the ideology of one or more students to a much more productive and important critique of the social sources of disinformation that produce ignorant misconceptions about people who belong to segments of society that are comparatively lacking in socio-political power.

In conclusion, I have argued that interventionism is necessary when students behave in an oppressive way toward each other. Yet I think that as teachers we can intervene without browbeating our students into adopting our world view so long as we have a class that is participatory and focused on dialogue-based learning. Emphasizing the roots of the bigoted attitudes students will occasionally express rather than denouncing such students will furthermore create a safe space in which these learners can go through a process of shedding these views on their own. In the long run, that strategy is likely to be much more fruitful and durable than if we simply compel students into thinking what we think.

¹ Endnote

For an example of some of these arguments, see Diana Brydon (2004). In this article she argues that “postcolonial pedagogy does aim to change minds and change the world, yet it cannot fall into the pedagogical assumptions that once made conversion such a potent ally of imperialism....Education is about responsible mind-changing yet has so often been imbricated in pedagogies of coercion and irresponsible persuasion” (p. 64). Though I disagree with what Brydon says here for the reasons I discuss above, she has a clear commitment to ethical, politically inflected pedagogical practices. Her work has produced many important insights on the subject, which is why I approvingly cite one of her ideas from this same article in the latter stages of my essay.

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